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ABSTRACT

This review of current research on parents' opinions about public schools provides information of interest to school boards, administrators, and parent leaders who wish to develop parent-community-school partnerships. This article discusses research done by organizations like the Public Agenda Foundation, the Gallup Poll, Phi Delta Kappa, and the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), based on surveys and focus groups from national samples, and by researchers and educators experienced in working with parents. Parents want children to learn academic content, but are equally concerned with work habits, preparation for the workplace, maintaining discipline, and citizenship skills. They support community use of school buildings, including locating social services in the schools. They are willing to invest increased financial resources to improve education and increasingly support lengthening the school year but not the school day. Parents also strongly support extracurricular activities, with a majority favoring community service requirements for graduation. Although parents believe that public schools are superior in supporting diversity and providing special education, they rate private schools higher for promoting religious and social values; maintaining discipline, safety, and higher academic standards; and having smaller class sizes. Parents recommend higher standards and more difficult work at all levels to improve educational outcomes. They favor administrative reductions and user fees for athletic and band programs, and oppose cutting extracurricular activities, salaries, or teaching staff. Favored reform strategies include school choice, site-based management, and charter schools. The views of conservative parents are less extreme than those of the groups who claim to represent them, and a large number of parents are actively involved in their children's education, holding high expectations, monitoring them, and helping them with homework. Most say they need better information to remain involved across the school years. (Contains 35 references.) (KDFB)

A Report on Parents' Opinions about Public Schools

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what parents want

Parents today are capturing headlines as they become more vociferous about schools and more politically active in educational decisions. In the fall of 1994, parents in a suburban New York community organized a public campaign to secede from a school district they saw as unresponsive to the needs of children, and campaigned to form a smaller district more to their liking (Celis, 1994). That spring, in Connecticut, an ambitious eighteen-month effort to redraw the state's education system was defeated in large part by strong opposition from well-organized parents in sixty communities. In Littleton, Colorado, educators had worked for two years to develop broad reforms, including new graduation requirements. But, before the reforms could be fully implemented, a tide of protest by parents brought in a new school board which significantly weakened the reform effort. Parents are becoming a constituency to be reckoned with in public education. Communities seeking families' support for new programs are learning that they must first establish relationships of trust — informing parents about reform strategies, engaging parents in identifying goals, and addressing local concerns.

Ironically, much of the public holds parents themselves responsible for the trouble schools are in. Legislatures across the country are passing laws to fine or even imprison parents for their children's misbehavior (Applebome, 1996). Public sentiment supports such actions. According to a survey done in 1994, 55 percent of the public believe parents are doing a worse job than when they themselves were young (Public Agenda Foundation, 1994a, p. 12).

A Connecticut study done the same year shows consistent results and fleshes out the survey findings through the use of follow-up focus groups. Eighty-two percent of those surveyed, and 81 percent of parents, believe that "parents these days are not fulfilling their responsibilities toward the education of their kids." Focus group participants identified three ways they believe parents are failing. First, they are not adequately preparing their children for school; second, they are too quick to find fault with the schools when something goes wrong; and, third, they do not support learning in the home, but instead allow children to spend too much time watching television or playing video games. Teachers are especially likely to point to lack of parental support (Public Agenda Foundation, 1994b, p. 17).

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In fact, a study of public opinion polls shows that the public's faith in parents has been dwindling over the last decade. In 1984, a third of the public would have given parents an "A" or "B" for the job they were doing (Gallup, 1984, pp. 23-38). By 1990, the same poll found that only a quarter of the public believes parents deserve an "A" or "B" (Elam, 1990, p. 52). In 1995, when the public was asked to identify the cause of violence in schools, they blamed family-related factors significantly more than the next highest category, drugs. Forty-four percent attributed school violence to lack of parental control and weak family structure (Elam & Rose, 1995, p. 54).

Parents' ratings of other parents have remained stable, but are also low. In 1983, when parents were asked who should bear the responsibility for discipline problems in the schools, three-quarters blamed it on the home (Gallup, 1984, p. 37). In that same survey, less than one-third of parents polled gave other parents a grade of "A" or "B" for the job they were doing (Gallup, 1984, pp.23-28). Ten years later, when parents were asked to identify the cause of increased violence among schoolchildren, 70 percent blamed the breakdown of the American family — both the increase in single parent families and the increase in "dysfunctional families" (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994, p. 44).

The public and parents themselves may be able to hold parents responsible for problems in schools, but educators and school board members cannot afford to blame parents. Political reality dictates that to be effective, educational leaders must develop a good working relationship with these newly powerful players. This will require a much better understanding of what parents want than most educators have today. A chance encounter with a local school board member illustrates the dilemma.

A two-hour delay on an Amtrak train provided the opportunity for an extended conversation with a member of a small town Rhode Island school board, herself a parent of children in the public schools. She spoke for a long time about her responsibility to ensure that the community's children get the best education possible. But one thing exasperated her. "What do parents want?" she wanted to know. She told me this story: One evening, the school committee, facing overcrowding, was prepared to vote to move the sixth grade up to the middle school. They were taken completely by surprise by a huge demonstration of parents opposed to moving the sixth grade students up one year earlier. This was very confusing, she said, because there had been a public hearing six months before in which parents had spoken out strongly *for* the move. "It's impossible to work with parents," she said. "How are we supposed to know what they want?"

Critical question. And it will grow more significant over time. Fortunately, recent research can begin to give educators some answers to this important question. This article discusses research done by organizations like the Public Agenda Foundation, the Gallup Poll, Phi Delta Kappa, and the PTA, based on surveys and focus groups from national samples, and by researchers and educators experienced in working with parents. Focus groups of parents from the Boston area were also conducted by Don Davies, Co-Director of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning and the author.

Throughout this report, the word "parents" refers to adults who currently have children in the public school system, or adults who have responsibility for raising those children.

What do parents believe the goals of education should be?

No educator would be surprised to learn that parents want schools to educate students — to be places where expert, caring teachers transmit to students "a body of proven, tested knowledge" that is monitored by "fair, objective testing practices" (Kay & Roberts, 1994, p. 1). But some educators might be surprised to learn that parents want schools to do more than teach academics. When asked in 1993 to prioritize the National Education Goals, 94 percent of the nation's parents gave Goal Five top priority. Goal Five combines concern for adult literacy, preparation for the work place in today's global economy, and development of citizenship capacities. Goal Three, the only goal which pinpoints academic competencies specifically, came in last (Gallup Organization, 1993, pp. 74, 59, 79, 89, 64).

Other studies show that parents believe schools should look beyond cognitive skills and should help instill appropriate values to prepare children to cope with modern American life. In a 1994 survey, a substantial majority of parents (90 percent) responded that emphasizing work habits like punctuality, dependability, and discipline are the most important things schools can do to improve academic performance (Johnson & Immerwahr, 1995, p. 42).

When asked what they considered important in their children's schools, parents rated discipline equally as high as quality of teaching staff and curriculum (Gallup Organization, 1991, pp. 303, 333, 338). Some educators may view their responsibilities more narrowly, but parents clearly hold expectations for schools that go beyond traditional concerns.

What ARE parents' attitudes about public schools? What do they think is working?

Since the late 1950s and the launch of Sputnik, national leaders and educators have been critical of America's public schools. In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* warned that the nation's public schools were drowning in a "rising tide of mediocrity." This very influential report gave impetus to a generation of reform efforts which promised to reinvent American education from the ground up.

Approval of the public schools. However, parents don't share experts' alarm. At least a plurality, and often a majority, of parents have consistently rated their local schools excellent or above average, giving them grades of "A" or "B" in an annual nationwide poll. In fact, in 1984, after parents would have had an opportunity to learn about the alarming information in *A Nation at Risk*, the percentage of parents giving their schools an "A" or "B" was even higher (52 percent) than it had been in the previous years: 1982, 49 percent; 1983, 42 percent (Gallup, 1984, p. 25). Parents generally agree (75 percent) that their children are learning what they should be learning, although this is lower than responses ten years before (81 percent) (Gallup, 1993, p. 41). In 1994, 57 percent of parents would have given their own community's schools an "A" or "B" (Elam et al., 1994, p. 45); in 1995, the figure was 49 percent (Elam & Rose, 1995, p. 39).

Parent approval for local public education has consistently been greater than the support expressed by the general public, reflecting their greater familiarity with schools. Seventy-one percent of parents believe the public schools in their communities are either excellent or good; the public approval rating is only 55 percent (Johnson, 1995, p. 39).

Since education is funded largely through local taxes, willingness to increase taxes for education is an especially good measure of support for the schools. Parents' willingness to pay more for schools has always been high and has even grown over time. In 1984, 54 percent of parents said they would pay more taxes to support the schools (up from 48 percent in 1983) (Gallup, 1984, p. 27). When the same question was asked in 1993, 71 percent of parents said they would pay more (Elam et al., 1993, p. 142). Not surprisingly, support for increased taxes for education is lower among the general public, but it has grown there also. In 1980, 30 percent of the public expressed support for higher taxes for education; in 1983, it was 39 percent; in 1984, it was 41 percent (Gallup, 1984, p. 27). When considering issues of equity, all Americans strongly support higher taxes for education. In 1989, 51 percent of the public were willing to pay more taxes "to improve the quality of schools in poorer states and communities." In 1993, 71 percent of parents and 68 percent of the public said they would (Elam et al., 1993, p. 142).

No longer school day. Parents' attitudes toward lengthening the school day and year have shown a gradual shift over the last fifteen years toward favoring the change. When first asked about such changes in 1982, a national survey found parents opposed, although by close margins (Gallup, 1982 pp. 47-48; pp. 39-40; 1983, pp. 28-29). However, in 1992, for the first time, a majority of parents (58 percent) expressed support for the longer school year. Of those who favored the longer year, 60 percent said they thought the school year should be divided into three or four segments with several weeks vacation between them rather than the traditional long summer break (Elam et al., 1992, p. 49). Only a third of parents favor a longer school day, and there is virtually no support for Saturday classes (Elam et al., 1993, p. 149).

Extracurricular activities. Consistent with support for educational goals which enhance development of the whole child, school activities outside academic classroom work also receive a great deal of parental support. Eighty percent of parents polled in 1984 thought extracurricular activities like band, drama, sports, and school newspaper were very important or fairly important. A great majority of parents even felt course credit should be given to students who volunteer to do community service. Eighty-six percent favored that proposition in 1978 and support was still at that level when the question was asked again in 1984 (Gallup, 1984, p. 31). A majority of parents even favor making community service a requirement for graduation. In 1989, 63 percent of parents expressed agreement with the concept and in 1993, 69 percent did (Elam et al., 1993, p. 46). When asked where they would cut school budgets, over two-thirds of parents opposed cutting extracurricular activities, third only to opposition to firing teachers and increasing class size to meet budget crises (Gallup Organization, 1991, pp. 503, 528, 513).

Community use of school buildings. Interestingly, parents are strongly supportive of using school buildings to address non-school related needs. For instance, parents voice strong support for keeping school buildings open, with adult supervision, for students on school days (90 percent), during weekends (68 percent), and during vacations (75 percent) (Elam et al., 1992, p. 51).

There is also strong parent support for locating social services, especially health, in the schools. In 1993, 80 percent or more of parents said they supported schools providing lunch, breakfast, immunizations, and screenings for vision and hearing. Seventy percent agree that schools should provide after-school care for children of working parents (Elam et al., 1993, p. 144). In 1995, high numbers of parents (93 percent) and the public (91 percent) alike said they believe it is very important or somewhat important for schools to expand their role to meet the emotional and health needs of students (Elam & Rose, 1995, p. 44).

Preschool programs. Parents and the public have even begun to recognize the importance of early preparation to school success and that schools have a legitimate role to play in the lives of preschool youngsters. Over three-quarters of parents believe preschool would improve school performance "a great deal" or "quite a lot" (Elam et al., 1992, p. 48). In a nationwide survey in 1993, two-thirds of parents and 59 percent of the public said they believe that child care centers should be available as part of the public school system, and should be supported by taxes (Elam et al., 1993, p. 143).

In summary, parents generally support their children's public schools, are willing to pay for good education, and believe the schools should be involved with children in a variety of ways, in addition to academics. Most parents care about the comprehensive needs of children and expect schools to do the same. They do not support a longer school day, but do support opening the school building for extra programs for students on school days, weekends, and vacations. From preschool programs to child care, to school lunch, to discipline, today's parents want schools to recognize that the needs of the whole child include intellectual development, but do not stop there.

What isn't working? What would parents change?

In spite of the consistent support shown in these national studies, parents' attitudes toward public schools are, in fact, very complicated, and educators cannot depend on broad and deep parent support for every policy. Comparative views of public and private schools highlight the complexity of parental attitudes and opinions.

A 1995 national survey explored parent preferences as they related to public and private schools. Many parents said they believe *public* schools are notably superior when it comes to providing an environment which teaches kids to deal with people from a variety of backgrounds (54%), and which offers help for special education students (49%). However, when parents were asked to base a decision between public and private schools on the following characteristics, more chose *private* schools: an appreciation for religious values (69 percent), smaller class size (65 percent), more discipline and order in the classroom (54 percent). Parents also saw private schools as being more likely to provide an environment that promotes values like honesty and responsibility (46 percent) than public schools (19%) or rated both public and private schools that same (20%). Parents also gave private schools the edge for providing more safety and security (46 percent) than public schools (19%) or rated them equally (15%). Forty-five percent of parents thought private schools provided higher academic standards, while 26 percent thought public schools did; only nine percent ranked both the same. Clearly, parents consider the "democratic" aspects of public schools, like teaching tolerance and helping all who have special educational needs, important. But, when it comes to other concerns, particularly values, individual attention, discipline,

safety, and academic standards, public schools fall short (Johnson, 1995, p. 37).

Notably, many parents would abandon public schools for private schools, *if they didn't have to pay tuition*. Nationally, nearly six out of ten public school parents say they would choose a private school for their children, with 36 percent choosing a religious school, and 21 percent choosing a non-religious private school. Two-thirds of New York parents with children in public schools said they would prefer private schools for their children, if tuition were not an issue (Johnson, 1995, p. 13).

Higher standards, tougher work. To improve educational outcomes, parents of both elementary and high school students would make standards higher and academic work tougher. Sixty percent think elementary students should be working harder, and 63 percent think high schoolers should be working harder. They think there is not enough challenge in the curriculum and not enough work is assigned (Gallup, 1983, p. 39). Parents support higher standards for promotion (84 percent), even if "national" and "standardized" tests are used to determine eligibility, and 82 percent support higher standards for graduation. When asked if higher standards should still be instituted if "significantly fewer students graduate," 59 percent of parents said "yes," consistent with parents' attitudes reported in 1986 and 1987. Additionally, 53 percent of parents believe that setting higher standards will encourage students from low-income families to achieve (Elam & Rose, 1995, p. 47).

When tough decisions must be made to cut education budgets, a great majority of parents favor reductions in administration; 72 percent would cut administrative staff to make up for budget shortfalls. Just over half support charging user fees for athletic and band programs. Only four out of ten would support a salary freeze (Gallup Organization, 1991, pp. 518, 538, 535). Opposition to eliminating extracurricular activities remains strong. In 1982, 67 percent said they would object to cutting them out (Gallup, 1982, p. 41); in 1991, 68 percent expressed the same opinion (Gallup Organization, 1991, p. 503). The highest funding priority for parents is maintaining the number of teachers in a school. Eighty-three percent object to reduction in the number of teachers and 79 percent object to increase in class size, another way to measure support for keeping teachers (Gallup Organization, 1991, pp. 513, 528).

The evidence shows that parents see room for improvement in schools. How, then, do they view current reform strategies? Many of the approaches now being proposed to improve schools are viewed favorably by parents. Among school choice, charter schools, and vouchers, choice receives the most parental support (69 percent) (Elam & Rose, 1995, p. 46). Although choice is the most favored, only half of parents believe they have enough information to make good choices for their children (Elam et al., 1991, p. 49). A plurality (44 percent) believe it will be very difficult or fairly difficult to get the necessary information to select a good school for their children (Elam et al., 1991, p. 49).

Many schools are adopting school governance reforms, moving toward being more inclusive in decision-making at the building level. There is a very large margin of support for such site-based decision-making among parents. Eighty-five percent of parents favor "policy decisions and changes" being made by councils of educators and parents in the school building to having those decisions made by school boards (Gallup Organization, 1991, p. 483).

Support for moving decision-making to the local level, especially when it is in exchange for greater accountability, includes parental support for charter schools (55 percent) (Elam et al., 1994, p. 54). While many parents endorse choice, there is not much approval for choosing private schools at public expense. Fifty-nine percent of parents oppose the use of vouchers (Elam & Rose, 1995, p. 46).

As school reform advocates learned in Connecticut and in Colorado, however, general parental endorsement of the need for improvement does not always mean parental support for implementation of specific school reforms. Gaining parent backing for implementing reform requires developing relationships of trust, informing parents about reform strategies, engaging parents in identifying rationales and goals, and addressing and reflecting local values and concerns.

One important 1994 study of parent attitudes in Kentucky sheds light on the complexities educators face when they attempt reform. In 1990, the Kentucky legislature undertook the most ambitious statewide reform effort in the nation (the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990, or KERA). But even there, where poor academic outcomes were widely publicized and were bad enough to drive major reform, the 1994 study showed that parents were ambivalent about the Kentucky reforms.

Robert Sexton, head of the Pritchard Committee which spearheaded the campaign for reform, described some of the public as confused by the language of reform, and disappointed that basic education, values, and discipline were not stressed in the legislature's reform scheme (Sexton, 1995, p. 10). A 1994 study shows that many parents did feel more distanced from the schools as a result of the reforms. Not only did they feel schools were not paying adequate attention to important values-related issues like discipline, parents also felt they were not able to support their children's learning or to understand how their children were progressing because the new approaches were so foreign to their experiences. However, there was a subset of parents who were far more trusting and supported KERA. These parents had children in schools which welcomed their participation, schools which parents had come to view as partners in their children's' learning and development. These parents were willing to go along with schools, even when they might have had some disagreement with the direction in which schools were moving (Kay & Roberts, 1994, p. 2).

Do parents participate in their own children's education?

Although the public finds parents at fault for what they see as declining academic achievement, evidence is strong that parents hold high expectations and support their children's learning. Diane Scott-Jones, a researcher with the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Temple University, has done a longitudinal study with 300 children, beginning in kindergarten. When her subjects were middle schoolers, 97 percent reported that their parents believe it is important to do well in school, and 93 percent said that their parents expected them to work hard on homework. Sixty-two

percent report that their parents expected them to go to college (Scott-Jones, 1995).

Scott-Jones' findings are supported by results from a 1993 survey in which 97 percent of parents said they expect their children to graduate from high school and nearly two-thirds (62 percent) consider their children "above average" (Finney, 1993, p. 14). Not only are parental expectations high, most parents follow through by actively being involved in their children's education. Ninety-two percent of parents report discussing a school topic with their children at least once a week (PTA/Dodge, 1990, p. 6). Seventy-four percent report that they talk to their children daily about school work (Finney, 1993, p. 14). Students in a 1995 statewide poll in Massachusetts report similar figures (Hart, 1994, p. 74).

Nearly half the parents (47 percent) in a 1993 poll said they work with their children on a daily basis with homework, and a similar percentage report they read to their preschoolers daily (PTA/Newsweek, 1993, p. 14). Scott-Jones, in the survey described earlier, found that 65 percent of students in her sample report that their parents have rules about homework. Most students reported that they need help with homework at least some of the time. Needing help and receiving it from parents was not related to parents' income or education levels. Eighty-three percent of students report that their parents always check their report card grades (Scott-Jones, 1995). When asked recently if they would be willing to sign a contract spelling out home and school responsibilities, nine out of ten parents said they would (Elam & Rose, 1995, p. 55). A parent in one of our focus groups compared a parental role in education to a "part-time job."

Some research shows that parents' involvement declines as students grow older (Nord & Zill, 1995). A Maryland survey suggests that decreased involvement may be less about a lack of interest and more about unfamiliarity with curriculum as students get into more complex academic work (Epstein, Connors, & Salinas, 1993). That survey found that 80 percent of high school parents want to be more involved in schools, but need more information to do so. In a focus group in suburban Boston, a parent of a teen described her feelings: "You know the curriculum pretty much in the lower grades, but when you get to the high school, I always thought a syllabus should be put out." Contrary to the research that shows declining parent participation as children age, a Massachusetts poll showed that more tenth graders report weekly parental conversations about school (87 percent) than do fourth graders (77 percent) (Hart, 1995, p. 74).

Although it is not yet clear what particular kinds of parent involvement are most effective with what age child, some preliminary research by Seyong Lee regarding high school students is potentially significant. In his research on the effect of parent involvement on academic success, he found family discussions about schoolwork have a positive effect on high school students' attitudes, behavior, and grades (Lee, 1994).

What do parents need to be better involved?

Although most parents support their children's learning by setting high expectations, by monitoring, and by helping, many would like to be more active, but feel that schools are not receptive. Parents feel that communication is the single most important area of school-home relationships that needs improvement. Poor communication leaves them unsure about how decisions are made and who makes them. Some parents feel that schools intentionally withhold information, and even the most involved parents must work very hard to be heard. Frustration and mistrust often develop. Many can only conclude that their participation is not welcome (Farkas, 1993, pp. 10-12).

Sometimes the information desired by parents is simple. In a 1993 survey, parents of high school students said they want to be more involved in their teen's education, but they need to know more about what kinds of programs the schools are offering and more about how to help with homework (Epstein, Connors, & Salinas, 1993).

At other times, however, especially with the advent of school choice programs, parents say they need more extensive information. Some districts have responded by publishing "report cards" for schools. For instance, in the spring of 1995, Ramon Cortines, then the Chancellor of the New York City schools, issued report cards to parents on nearly two-thirds of the city's high schools. Information contained in the reports included standardized test scores, graduation and dropout rates, teacher turnover figures, and numbers of student suspensions.

While this is the kind of information typically offered by school districts to parents (Jaeger, Gorney, & Johnson, 1994, pp. 42-45), it does not answer the kinds of questions *parents* find most important. The top three concerns of *parents* when they assess a school are school climate, program offerings, and school staffing/characteristics of teachers, issues which most reports of this kind do not discuss (Jaeger et al., 1994, p. 43).

The Public Education Association of New York has created a report which *is* well suited to parents' interests (Public Education Association and East Brooklyn Congregations, 1995). It gives profiles of five middle schools in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, New York, based on information provided by the district and from interviews with parents. The report consists of several pages of description per school. For each one, there is a section which includes a summary of statistics, giving basic facts like enrollment (general education and special education), average class size, numbers of students with limited English proficiency, numbers of teachers and their record of absences, and achievement test scores showing what percent of the students scored at or near the national average. In each case, the figures for the particular school are compared to district figures.

Following the chart is information gleaned from parents reflecting the "look and feel of the school." The conditions of rest rooms and cafeteria are described; the programmatic organization of the school and the philosophy of the educators are explained. Parents discuss the attitudes of teachers and the degree to which they engage children actively in learning. The nature and quantity of homework and class assignments are explained. Parents comment on whether the schools are safe, whether they feel welcome in them, and how much they are allowed to participate.

Parents report that the booklet itself is very helpful; but even the process of creating such a product has value. While they are providing information and hearing views of other parents, their own awareness of common concerns can be deepened and their energies for improvements focused. This kind of report addresses important needs and could be undertaken by parents or citizens in any community.

What about divisive attacks on public education?

Many educators, especially those leading reforms in the communities mentioned at the beginning of this article, often feel threatened by some parent groups. In many localities, groups labeled "far-right" or "ultra-conservative" claim to speak for parents and have successfully scuttled reforms and stirred up divisive controversies in the name of traditional values.

Some local ultra-conservative groups represent all or most parents who think of themselves as conservative. A Virginia organization has developed a "parents rights" amendment which they propose states adopt in order to give parents "greater oversight of academic standards and [to] help ensure that values taught at school don't conflict with those taught at home" (Walsh, 1995). Legislation with similar language and intent has been introduced by both houses of Congress (Bradley, 1995).

Some very interesting research raises questions about the extent to which ultra-conservative groups represent all or most parents who think of themselves as conservative. In a 1994 national survey, the Public Agenda Foundation explored attitudes held by "Traditional Christian" parents, (i.e., those who take the Bible as the literal word of God or consider themselves "born again"). They found that "Traditional Christian" parents do not differ so drastically from other parents in their concerns. Similar proportions of parents in both groups denounce drugs and violence in the schools, call for more discipline, and are in favor of the schools teaching values. In most areas where a divergence of opinion between the groups does exist, the gap is not so wide (Johnson & Immerwahr, 1994, p. 32).

This research demonstrates that the views of conservative or traditional parents may not be as extreme as some of the groups who claim to represent them. Based on these findings, educators might expect that parents who identify themselves as "conservative" could hold opinions that are more similar to than different from the rest of parents on the "hot button" social issues. It may well be that parents who hold more extreme views are better organized politically, get more press, and seem to represent more voices than they do.

Seymour Sarason, a well-known Yale psychologist, offers advice to educators when parents do hold extreme views. He argues that the practice of democracy demands that "the political principle" be followed: that all those affected by a decision should have a voice in it. In applying the political principle to education, Sarason advocates engaging even the most polarizing elements in a community. He challenges educators to allow the voices of all parents to be heard in school decisions, even if their opinions are considered extreme. He believes that through honest and open debate educators will sharpen their understanding of educational issues, will be more effective leaders, and thus stand to gain parent support.

Recent controversies in two states with very different outcomes reiterate a final, key point. Pennsylvania was the site of a bitter and protracted campaign against "Outcomes Based Education" in the early nineties. A statewide campaign waged in the name of parents and traditional values resulted in substantial alterations being made to proposed statewide education goals. However, a similar effort mounted shortly thereafter in Kentucky failed. Kentucky's goals had been proposed in conjunction with KERA. During the difficult days when it seemed that Kentucky's goals would fall victim to the same kind of campaign that was effective in Pennsylvania, Kentucky parents *who were familiar with local schools* rejected the rhetoric of the right wing as overblown. The goals were adopted with only minor revisions (Kannapel, Moore, Coe, & Aagaard, 1995).

The lesson is clear and critical. Educators need parents as much as parents need educators. Creating a climate of welcome for parents can garner community support for schools. Even when school policies did not match their desires in every way, parents were willing to relate to *welcoming* schools as allies. And allies are what public education always needs greatly.

CONCLUSION — So, what do parents want?

Today's parents hold a broad vision about what schools should be doing to meet the needs of their children. They want schools involved heavily in the lives of children and the community they live in. Parents see the child as a whole, while schools have traditionally been more focused on intellectual development. Some segments of the parent population differ from the mainstream, but, by and large, parents across the board hold similar opinions. They want their children to learn academic content, but they are equally concerned with work habits and citizenship skills. They also want schools to provide for the health and emotional needs of students, offering services such as meals, vision and hearing checks, and child care for working parents.

Parents' interest in their children is deep; they are willing to invest increased financial resources to improve educational programs and results. And, contrary to opinions held by the public and many teachers, a great number of parents are actively involved in their children's education. They hold high expectations for their children and most monitor and help their children with schoolwork. Most, however, say they need better information from the schools to remain involved with their children across the school years.

Most parents see schools as integral to democracy. Parents want children of all skill and income levels to succeed. And they want attitudes of fairness to predominate, even when it comes to marginalized populations. Parents support some school reform efforts, but do not favor spending public dollars to send children to private schools.

Educators can no longer expect to work effectively without knowing what parents want, especially the parents of the children in the schools in which they work. Although national surveys and focus groups give a framework within which to think about parents' concerns, the only real way to know what parents in a given district or school think is to engage them in the life of the schools. As Sarason says, educators today must allow all voices to be heard, even the extreme. Experience shows that out of such debate can come a strengthened community, support for schools, and stronger educational leadership.

Many educators are changing decades of tradition. They meet regularly with parents, offer them school space to use as their own, and engage their help in solving problems by including them as full partners in action research projects. Educators are learning the importance of including parents. When asked how he was able to sustain such broad parental involvement, a Houston

principal replied that he had to — the school could not operate without the parents (Ford, 1995). ■

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Boston, Massachusetts, December 6, 1995

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